Chapter 4

Critical Humanism and Online Learning: Using Discussion Boards as a Means of Production

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is an attempt to personalize online education. Across the writing, the authors use discussion boards, a means of inquiry, to offer students a space where shared experiences might foster deeper connections to subject matter. The concern for learning is how to design instruction to encourage critical learning opportunities in online environments for all students. A departure from traditional online delivery of instruction, they considered how to plan teaching to support student critical thinking in the expression of their ideas. Throughout this chapter, they discuss how critical theory/pedagogy informed practice in promoting self-awareness and critical consciousness among students.

INTRODUCTION

Discussion boards are often intimidating impersonal teaching spaces; instructors use them to maintain student focus on material covered during face-to-face sessions and as is increasingly the case via delivery of curricula in online teaching. On university discussion boards (Blackboard, WebCT, CANVAS etc.) students are required by their instructors to submit their impressions covering material from instructor lectures, current class readings or other educational experiences. The exchanges between students and
instructors are digitized prompts lacking the human component to learning, that is, support for the risks involved in submitting what students believe or understand about the material.

Meaning and intent often become victims of the virtual void. In an electronic exchange, be it chat room, email or discussion board, students may not read the expressions instructors would normally use during face to face conversations. Missing also is the tone a person uses in communicating excitement, joy or anxiety. Lost in the digital translation are the unique ways humans communicate, the real-time spontaneity created by face-to-face communication. Implied here is the loss of the personality of a contributor: we do not see facial expressions and miss the tone a person ordinarily adds to their voice; what we have to interpret are the characters a person uses to convey meaning. The instant a message is sent out we are locked into the statement which the student or person who receives it may or may not understand affecting intention, meaning and recognition.

The personal commitment of a mentor and friend, a critical element to a student’s wellbeing and success, is often the difference between whether or not a student becomes an engaged and active participant in the class or simply shuts down. Indeed, as Goodlad (1984) argues, the distance and coldness of impersonal pedagogy frequently lead to students’ disengagement from academic life. As Rancer, Jordan-Jackson and Infante, (2007) also claim, the interpersonal connection is a key component in message reception and conveyance. It is the interpersonal affirmation and connections drawn between students and instructors that ignite their and our passion for learning. This study is an analysis of on-line pedagogy and student responses or reception as I (Arturo) supported their learning using a discussion board during a Master of Education course. To make discussion boards more than sites with which to exchange ideas we submit the following: 1) Freirean/Socratic problem posing/problem solving to elaborate discussions between my students and myself to drive engagement, clarity of focus and critical understandings. 2) Our position includes a critical framework for constructing meaning: we are authentic and reflexive in our practice, committed to student involvement, social justice and personal and intellectual development of students. 3) Use of Critical Humanist framework/Curriculum (Magill & Rodriguez, 2015) in facilitation of reflexive praxis within potentially limiting virtual space.

**Theoretical Perspective**

We take the position that as Freire (1985), Apple (2000), and many others have argued education and especially teaching are inherently political. Critical humanism offers instructors a position with which to conduct research to better inform practice and increase the potential for a more engaged and analytical outcome for student learning, while accepting that as they do so they make a decidedly political statement. We cannot claim schooling outcomes are solely dependent on a student’s level of engagement. What we mean is students will be affected by the quality of care and support, or lack thereof, they receive in schools. All students are affected by the exchanges that occur between themselves, their peer groups and their teachers. Success or failure, in learning the material, is determined not by whether or not students want to learn or know how to learn, but by how they mediate their social, cultural, political and historical relationships with their teachers. In the spirit of critical humanistic practice, we suggest not simply using the master’s tools (Gordan & Gordan, 2006; Lorde, 2018) in design and construction of an online space. These conditions have a tendency to recreate the historically one-sided and uncritical teacher student relationship.

Rather, a teacher, we suggest, is as Freire argues a “cultural worker; teachers labor with students to mediate the values, and mores of the society, which may impinge on students’ intellectual curiosity, moral
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